

The Experience of God as Personal

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THE purpose of this paper is to treat of God as personal, not from the philosophical or theological angle, but from the angle of the practical religious life. It is based on two convictions: First, that belief in God as personal is central in the Christian creed. Second, that such belief, if it is to be not only central in the Christian creed, but also formative of the Christian life and character, must be more than a mere statement assented to by the mind; it must be realized with a vividness not incomparable to that with which we are aware of personality in one another. It must be a *living* as distinct from a merely *theoretical* belief.

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I

Let us first say something about this distinction between living and theoretical beliefs, and its relation to the subject under discussion.

By *theoretical* beliefs we mean beliefs to which we sincerely assent, but at the moment of assenting there seems to be very little more involved than the merely thinking part of us. By *living* beliefs we mean beliefs to which we assent, not only with the thinking part of us, but also with a more or less deep reverberation of feeling and a more or less definitely directed movement of will. That there is this broad distinction in our beliefs few will deny, although in actual experience the distinction is not always clear-cut. Much might be said, if this were the place to say it, about the relation of the two sorts of belief to one another and the way in which they flow in and out of one another. Sometimes the same belief falls more to the side of the theoretical at one moment, and more to the side of the living at another, according to our mood, or need, or immediate task. Thus the proposition "God is Holy" may command our whole-hearted assent and yet hardly stir feeling and will at all; yet, at another time, it may stir feeling and conscience so deeply that we are brought to our knees in self-accusation, and sent out to make confession and restitution for some wrong done. Probably there are some beliefs to which many Christians, for various reasons, sincerely assent, but which are never brought out

of the realm of the theoretical into the realm of the living; though, even then, that they gain assent at all is probably due to the fact that they are bound up in the believer's mind with some belief which is living. But however subtly the relations between the two types of belief might be analyzed, the broad distinction remains clear enough in the everyday religious life. Probably the most vivid awareness of it comes in the difference which everybody knows only too well between the preacher who announces the great truths of Christian Faith in a dead, flat, merely theoretical way, and the preacher who announces them as though they really mattered both to himself and to his hearers. We know the difference through the difference in our own inner response. In the one case a merely theoretical assent is evoked, in the other feeling and will are also stirred.

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It is, of course, a truism that what keeps Christianity alive as a vital and creative force in the midst of mankind is its living convictions, or rather it is the folk who have such convictions—the folk by whom the great Christian truths are not merely assented to as theological statements, but are vigorously affirmed and lived because they grip and engage feeling and volition as well. Most Christians realize, too, in a dim sort of way that not only must living convictions be present in at least *some* Christians, if Christianity is to remain a vital power in the world; they must also in some measure be present in *them* if their own Christian profession is to make any significant difference to their lives. A Christian life in which

living convictions, as distinct from mere assents, or mere refusals to deny, of the mind, are not being built up is, we feel, no matter what amiable qualities it may possess, not only sterile and superficial, but also under perpetual threat of complete collapse. For it is the mark of a living conviction that it has an intrinsic vitality which enables it to attack, and even grow strong and more sure of itself through, what challenges it; whereas, a theoretical belief, so far from attacking, itself requires constant argumentative support and defense. To use a well-worn distinction, theoretical beliefs we have to carry, which is apt to be very wearisome, and merely an added burden when the going is hard. But a living belief, in spite of all falterings, somehow lifts and carries us.

This does not mean that for our religious life to be what it ought to be we must always be in an exalted mood of conviction, or be ready to rise into such a mood at any moment when some great Christian affirmation is mentioned or under discussion. That would wear everybody out. Such a notion makes for unreality of feeling, which is worse than having no feeling about these matters at all. The man who feels it incumbent upon him to display feeling at, or mix unction in, every mention of a fundamental Christian truth revolts us all. We instinctively feel that his convictions, far from being really living, are such that he dare not for a single moment leave them to look after themselves. The mistake is to identify living convictions with merely excitable and emotional ones, those which have, so to say, a hair-trigger ac-

tion. The truth is, of course, that there are times and occasions when the more theoretical, reflective, critical attitude is appropriate and necessary. Moreover, it is a common enough experience of even the saints to fall into passing moods when the life seems to go out of what has hitherto been their most living convictions, and they are forced to carry on in the persuasion that these convictions, though now overclouded, are really the insights of their deeper and more trustworthy selves. Yet, of course, such a persuasion is only possible because there are convictions of a living and not merely theoretical sort to look back upon, it being the quality of a living conviction that it is so founded in the deeper life of the whole personality that its virtue abides even when, for one reason or another, its vitality seems low.

The reason why living convictions are thus essential in a vigorous and growing Christian experience and witness is not far to seek and brings us to the subject of this article. It is that Christianity is nothing if not the affirmation that the ultimate environment with which we have to deal is personal. It consists of persons in relation to one another—God himself, as the ultimate Reality from which the whole draws its being and character and destiny, being himself in some sense personal—and this no matter what philosophical difficulties the idea of personality as applied to God may raise. Now, it is the mark of a personal relationship that one cannot even begin to get inside it, still less get to know it for what it is and be rightly related to it, through a merely theoret-

ical approach. There must be feeling and valuation and will, and something of that utterly distinct personal relationship of respect and trust. This is why it is so misleading to find an analogy, as some do, between the so-called faith of the scientist when he makes experimental ventures on the basis of more or less conjectural hypotheses, and the faith of the Christian God. The two lie in entirely different fields. The former is purely theoretical, the latter must have something of feeling and will in it, must have trust in the personal sense in it, otherwise it is foredoomed to disappointment. You do not trust a person by making experiments with him to see whether he is trustworthy, for the necessity to make experiments shows that in the living and personal sense you do not as yet really trust him at all.

240 The gulf between theoretical and living convictions, indeed, nowhere appears more clearly than in personal dealings. Probably we have all experienced, sometimes with a shock, the difference between thinking about and passing judgment upon a person who we have never met, and then encountering and speaking with him face to face. Up to the moment of meeting he has been to us merely a "he," scarcely distinguishable, indeed, so far as our attitude is concerned, from an "it"; but now, as he looks into our eyes and we have to adjust ourselves to him as living will, he becomes, if we may use the phraseology with which recent German authors have made us familiar, a "thou," and instantly there come into play feelings and attitudes, which may

sweep away altogether all our previous theoretical conclusions about him. We begin to have living convictions and insights about him, for the reason that we are now in immediate personal rapport with him and with a personal order through him.

II

If all this be true, then it is clear that no more important question can be asked, from the standpoint of the Christian life, than how we may become livingly aware of God as personal. To ask such a question is to address ourselves to one of the most fundamental issues, perhaps *the* most fundamental issue, of the present-day religious situation. For the modern man, for reasons into which we do not here seek to enter, finds it extremely difficult to think of God as personal at all; and a great many Christians, soaked in the atmosphere of the age, share the disability, with the result that their Christian experience, if the thesis of this paper be sound, remains a weak and ineffective thing. Nor is the situation going to be met by merely arguing about the legitimacy of thinking of God as personal. We may dispose of all the intellectual difficulties and show that a theistic philosophy is an entirely respectable one and not in the least forbidden by the conclusions of science; we may produce a persuasive theodice and show that all the apparently impersonal disasters and compulsions of the world-order are not finally incompatible with the thought of a personal Father of our spirits; we may point to the witness of

Christian experience all down the ages, beginning with Jesus himself, that God may be known and trusted in a personal way. Yet at the end of it all, we may have; achieved very little, for the truth that God is personal, though accepted, may remain still merely theoretical, still merely a truth *about* God. The immediate, living, personal encounter with God, so that he is not merely said to be personal but is livingly dealt with as such, may still be far enough way. This is not to minimize the importance of reflexion in the religious life; it is only to point out once again the commonplace that by itself it can do very little, and to indicate the reason for it, namely, that in a strictly personal order general truths about
241 God, though sincere believed, may leave you still without a truly personal and living relationship to it. It is one of our modern fallacies, obsessed as we are with the methods and deliverances of science, that the more we attain to general truths the nearer we come to ultimate reality. Whether this is in any sense so in any sphere of experience is perhaps open to question; but it is certainly not true in what to the Christian is the place where we quite certainly touch ultimate reality, and that is in the sphere of our personal dealings with God and with one another.

How then does a living conviction of God as personal come to a man's spirit?

We may begin with something which is more immediate and familiar, and to which reference has already been made, namely, our awareness of one another as personal beings.

Nothing is clearer to us in our ordinary, everyday life than the distinction between persons and things. The fact that in the animal world we have to deal with creatures which are neither one nor the other merely emphasizes the more the clarity and certainty of our awareness of personality when it confronts us. When I talk to my neighbor over the garden-hedge it is quite impossible for me, even for a moment or two, to react to him as I do to the dog, even though I may call him one to my wife afterwards. Nor am I in the least danger of confusing him suddenly with the radio which is talking, possibly far more intelligently, through the window. And the reason for this is not merely that external appearances and other coincident conditions make such a confusion impossible. There is also something peculiarly and intrinsically coercive and self-evident in the immediate relationship into which both have come through that conversation. A mechanical talking-doll made to look like him and by some inconceivable mechanism able to carry on an intelligent conversation for a minute or two would not deceive even for that minute or two. Something intangible, but very real, would be missing. As I talk to him, hear his views, say things which he repudiates, listen to things which I repudiate, sense feeling passing from one to the other—I just know, directly and indubitably, that I am in that quite distinctive relationship with that quite distinctive sort of being which I call personal. Some, indeed, have suggested that what happens is that I perceive with my senses the activities of my neigh-

242 bor's body—his voice, his gestures, his whole physical behavior—and then merely infer, by a swift and habitual process of thought, that this must be someone with an inner personal life like my own. But that is surely not what happens. The perception of my neighbor as personal is much more immediate and luminously certain than any conclusion to an inference, however swift and immediate, could ever be. Theoretically I should be bound to admit, if I paused for a moment and thought about it, that such an inference might be all wrong; my neighbor, after all, might, theoretically, be an elaborate mechanism or a hallucination. But when I am in practical rapport with him, I just know that such an idea is silly, if not meaningless. I am emphatically not here working with inferences, which might conceivably be mistaken. I *know* immediately that I am in a personal world, a personal dimension with him.

There is, to be sure, a certain paradoxical duality in the relationship. Owing to the fact that human personality is an indissoluble unity of mind and body, the awareness of my neighbor as personal seems to be at one and the same time a mediate and an immediate relationship. I could not have dealings with my neighbor were it not for the impressions that his physical being makes upon my senses; yet he is not hidden behind, and merely inferred from, the impressions he makes upon my senses. This, possibly, has some relevance to the question how we may become immediately aware of God as personal in and through the created order. An

analogy might be found in the beauty of a melody. Physically the melody is merely a succession of notes and intervals, and that, presumably, is all it is to the dog. But to the musician the notes are not merely apprehended in this dimension of the physical; they are also apprehended as lying within the entirely different dimension of the beautiful. Nor can the one dimension be reached by inference from the other. The listener has suddenly to find himself as he listens to the notes in a dimension of the beautiful, a dimension which transcends the physical notes whilst depending on them, and has a certain intrinsic reality of its own. So it is with the perception of personality in one another.

Yet though there is this mediate immediacy in our perception of our fellows as personal, we can isolate and put our finger on what seems a quite central thing in it. This is our awareness of purpose, or will, coming forth from the other and meeting in a certain tension and resistance, our purpose and will. He values certain things and we value certain things, and the two sets of values clash and resist; or if they do not clash and resist, there is still felt to be a tension between them, for we have, and can have, no control whatever over his values and purposes. Now it is in this value-resistance, or tension, that our perception of the other man as personal becomes most vivid. In all departments of life we become most vividly aware of a reality other than ourselves at the point where it offers tension or resistance. In physical things

the resistance is to muscular pressure; in the realm of personality it is the resistance of values, of the other man's deliberately directed will and intention against ours. A man who is utterly subservient to another's purposes becomes a curiously flat, unreal, negligible sort of being. We say of him, "He has no personality; he is a nonentity." A person becomes an entity to us by having a purpose which meets ours and is beyond our control. Here, indeed, the difference between persons and things becomes most obvious. The pressure-resistance of things is overcome by manipulation; the value-resistance of persons we can only overcome by something we call agreement, reconciliation. If we attempt to overcome a value-resistance by manipulation, say by hypnotism, we speak of an abuse of personality and everybody knows what is meant even though it may be very hard to express it in words. In the light of this, let us return to the question of a living awareness of God as personal. If there is continuity between the personal world in which we live with our fellows and that in which we live with God—and Christianity, of course, emphatically affirms such a continuity—then this simple truth of great importance emerges, namely, that a central and indispensable thing in a living awareness of God as personal is something which happens, and must continue to happen again and again, in the sphere of our values, our wills. It will not be, we repeat, a matter of arguing, philosophically or otherwise, that the world *looks* as though it might have a

personal purpose behind it, any more than my vivid perception of personality in my neighbor came by arguing that thus his physical antics might best be explained. It will be rather by becoming vividly and continuously aware of, and responding to, certain value-resistances, thrust down into the midst of our own values and preferences, of such a nature that we cannot but know them to come from the Eternal. The peculiar mark by which the religious mind recognizes certain value-resistances to come from the eternal is that they carry with them an accent of absolute unconditionality; that is, they call for obedience literally at any cost, even the cost of the complete surrender of life, whatever we may feel about it. We cannot here examine further this identification of an *absolute* value-resistance with the sense of the Will of God. We can only assume that so it is to the religious mind and stress the one thing that is germane to our purpose, namely, this truth: When once the Eternal is genuinely apprehended and sincerely faced in an unconditional value-resistance, the living awareness of it as Personal has begun, for, as we have seen, by value-resistance personal reality, the personal dimension, is known.

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That awareness of God is deeply related to the awareness of value and to the direction of the will is doubtless a truism of religious thought; but that is not what we have been seeking to express here. There is all the difference in the world between saying that through our sense of values we apprehend the Eternal and saying that in certain searching

value-resistances God actively thrusts himself into the central places of our personality and speaks to us a summoning word; just as there is all the difference in the world between having a forceful neighbor come rapping at the door and vaguely intending at some convenient season yourself to call upon him. It is precisely this sense of activity in God that the modern man seems to have lost. And further, there is all the difference in the world between *saying* that God is Personal Purpose and thrusts these value-resistances into our being, and reacting to these value-resistances as though they are in very truth the impact of Personal Purpose upon us. It is here that even the best of us continually fail. God sets up a resistance in the sphere of our wills and its values and we are willing to *say* that it is God speaking to us; but in actual fact we treat the resistance again and again in an impersonal way, just as we might treat a physical hindrance, something to be got over or got round or otherwise adjusted to our purposes. Seldom do we look through the value-resistance into the eyes of an active God. To begin to do that is to begin to have a living sense of God as Personal.

III

But it is only a beginning. Let us now make the matter far more concrete and practical by laying down a further principle. It is that there cannot be a living awareness of God as personal unless we realize that God meets our wills with his value-resistances always in the plane of our personal

relations with one another. Unless a man is meeting God with the utmost seriousness in that plane, unless he is realizing that the one supreme achievement in life from God's point of view is to be in right relations to the men and women who cross his path, and this at any cost of resistance to his own natural feelings and impulses, he cannot meet him to much profit in any other plane of life, nor, certainly, grow into a living sense of him as personal. The solemn value-resistances of God concern themselves with our relations to our neighbors and not any other things. As to what constitutes right and wrong relations with our fellows it is not here to the point to discuss. It is enough that most men and women do as a matter of fact know when things are not what they ought to be in this sphere. The point then is that when that happens they must realize that it is an unspeakably important thing, that they have reached a point of crisis in God's personal dealings with them. If they respond as they ought the door begins to open into a new personal world in which the sense of God as personal seeking personal ends is increasingly built up in the soul; if they do not the door is infallibly closed.

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It is told of Aggrey, the African Negro Christian, descended from a line of proud chieftains, that once at breakfast he spoke hurtlingly to his wife in the presence of her sister. That night God met his proud spirit in a tremendous value-resistance. He must, apologize and set the matter right. Very well, he would do it very quietly and privately.

Then God resisted that. The apology must be in the presence of the sister for she too had been present and was involved, therefore, in the jangled personal relationship. All night God wrestled with Aggrey's imperious nature, and won. At breakfast the next day Aggrey apologized unconditionally to both women, who, knowing his nature, were almost in tears at such a total and humble giving away of self to them. Surely at that table all most livingly felt, as never before or elsewhere, the overshadowing reality of God—of God, not as a vague cosmic force, or as an inscrutable Being dwelling beyond the things of time and sense and to be worshiped in vague, adulatory phrases, but as Personal Purpose working recreatively and insistently with a personal world of personal relationships.

This is an example of a somewhat unusual strain and crisis in a man's spiritual history, and we should misunderstand the way in which the awareness of God as personal is built up into living conviction if we read the matter merely in terms of such crises as quarrels and estrangements. The distinctive thing about personal relations is that it is the one world in which we are all the time, in a way that we are not in the world of art, or science, or what is loosely known as "nature." It is challenging and fashioning us all the time. Hence if we are living in it with a mind continually made sensitive and responsive by the awareness that here is God's fundamental challenge to our souls, the living conviction of God as personal is being built up all the time in ways of

which we are hardly aware and which it would be impossible to trace. It becomes a massive conviction which is proof against every skepticism and doubt, and which is not in the least dependent upon having any mystical experience of a Personal Presence to reinforce it. So many people seem to think that a living conviction of God as personal requires such a mystical experience. It is a complete mistake.

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Once again, all this may seem in a measure platitudinous. Yet it is one thing to agree in general terms that God meets us primarily and usually resistantly, in the plane of personal relations, and another thing living to realize it and sincerely to respond to it, as Aggrey did, in the concrete and demanding situations of daily life. It is because so many fail to do this that God remains so desolatingly unreal to them, and if they continue to believe in him it is as a vague Cosmic Force rather than as a personal Being. So many people try to work up a feeling of the nearness and reality of God by some technique of devotion, or at some service of worship made impressive with beautiful music and solemn verbiage, or by going into the woods on a Spring day, and they fail dismally in the attempt, because all the time their personal relations are wrong or on a shockingly low or unredeemed level. It is refusing to meet God on the one plane where his reality as personal can ever be livingly made known to man and built up into the deepest assurances of his being. Especially in these days is much humbug talked about worshipping God "in God's open air," what Mr. Irving Babbitt calls

“mixing oneself up with the landscape and calling it religion.” Christ’s words about leaving the gift on the altar and being first reconciled to your brother are not the less relevant because the altar happens to be a bird-bath and the temple a pergola. Few more unchristian things, indeed, have ever been said than that “we are nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.” Infinitely nearer is the man who is seeking to knit together some tragic, and even sordid, estrangement of human hearts. Such an one is very close to the Cross, that Cross which rises right out of the heart of men’s personal relationships with one another.